



Notre Dame du Haut, The subject is another viewpoint of Le Corbusier's architecture,
this photograph is not documentary!

Emanuele Piccardo, Ronchamp, France, 2009

photographing and filming architecture. a different way of writing architectural history

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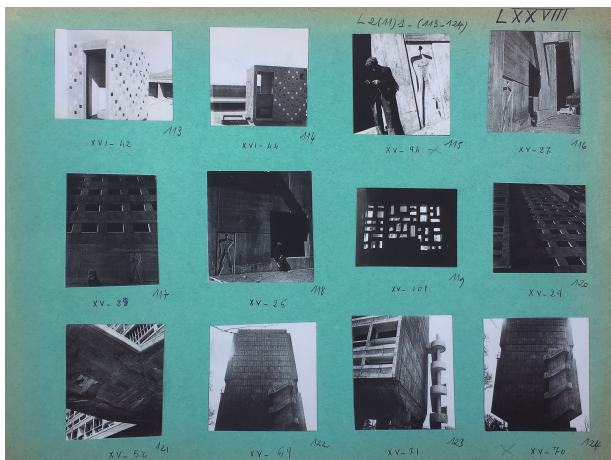
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Without photography there can be no history of modern architecture. The role of the photographer is often marginal and consigned by architectural historians to documentarians lacking any interpretative skills. If we analyse the work of certain photographers, such as Lucien Hervé, Le Corbusier's historic collaborator, we can reach beyond a superficial view of his work to establish the degree of interpretation during the construction phase and in the subsequent sequences, especially those not suggested and selected by Corbu to create the iconography of his work. Besides, it was after his visit to the Marseille Unité d'Habitation that Hervé took 650 photographs, which he posted to Corbu, who replied: "you have the soul of an architect and know how to look at architecture". This knowing how to look at architecture inspired Julius Shulman from the very outset. With his photographs of Neutra's Kaufman House he developed a new iconography, which introduced architectural photography for magazines as a new discipline. In the seventies, the reporter, Gianni Berengo Gardin, took a different approach and his portrayal of the works of Renzo Piano focused on people using spaces. At the opposite end of the scale, Guido Guidi felt empathy for the architecture of Carlo Scarpa by putting himself in the architect's shoes and establishing a visual discourse with him. Thus, a contrast appears between the historical-critical vision of architecture, based exclusively on the relationship between the two-dimensional image and three-dimensional spaces, and a more relevant vision, which puts together a written critical text, photography and film. The latter method partly restores the complexity of architecture, even though the physical experience of crossing over is beyond compare. In the first case, we find the typical attitude of twentieth century historiography, which contrasts the documentary photographic vision at the service of historians and customer-architects with authorial photography, which interprets architecture according to different reasoning, languages and references, all typical of the field of photography. The aim of the paper is to demonstrate how the tools of investigation into architectural history can be reformulated with the use photography, which is finally considered as a critical visual text on a par with the written text. An analysis is made of the photographs of Hervé, Shulman, Guidi, Berengo Gardin and some contemporary photographers who, with their interpretative architectural photography contrast the neutral, documentary vision that architectural journals continue to publish today. At the same time, the paper also wishes to demonstrate how photography today can no longer suffice to render the complexity of architecture. On the contrary, it is just one of the essential media, such as films and documentaries. Thus, simply by using more than one of these, our understanding of the dynamics of architecture will improve.

keywords Architectural history, Photography, Movies

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When Bruno Zevi wrote his History of Modern Architecture in 1950, photography was essential for him to be able to narrate the epic story of architecture and its protagonists. Not cultured, artistic photography but, on the contrary, iconic photography, which uses a single image to represent the complexity of space. Since its invention in 1839, photography has been used to document cities, landmarks and landscapes. This is what the French pioneering photographers did with their Mission Héliographique [Heliographic Mission]¹ of 1851 and, a century later, the Mission de la Datar [DATAR Photographic Mission]² of 1984, in which the photographers documented the French urban and rural landscape. From the twentieth century onwards, the relationship between architects and photographers has revealed a visual difference between the intention of the architect, who has a mental image of his architecture and the photographer's realism which, from a scientific viewpoint portrays with stark precision what the photographic lens regurgitates. This was reflected in the relationship between Lucien Hervé and Le Corbusier (see the image below).



f1_Unité d'habitation. In this series of photographs Hervé presents different situations: the volumes, light, Unité forms still under construction.

Lucien Hervé. Marseille, France 1945.

On the one hand, the photographer who offers the architect his services and becomes the promoter of his brand name in a relationship of obvious psychological submission in the analysis of the contact sheets which Hervé made of Le Corbusier's architecture. The photographs La Corbusier selected are those which emphasise and dramatise most his forms and orthodox architectural principles, thanks to the black and white images. Thus, the construction site photographs, which Hervé took in Marseilles during the construction of the Unité d'habitation, are more interesting than the "official", formalist photographs, and a true visual propaganda tool. In fact, as the historian of photography, Italo Zannier pointed out: "Like Wright, Le Corbusier did not really appreciate photography as a means of expression"³. Photography had to be servile, humble and could not be considered

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an independent art on the same level as architecture. The situation remains the same today in the so-called photography of architecture, which magazines propose both on paper and on their web sites. One example is Archdaily, which offers the same architectural view as that of a paper magazine, such as Domus or Architectural Review, where the photographers chosen by the architects perform their task of documentation without attempting any kind of interpretation. Archdaily, like other platforms, does not exploit the web's potential to allow new, more fluid, more immediate forms of representation to create hypertexts amidst words, with fixed and moving images of the same piece of architecture. On the contrary, on-line magazines are created by transferring the same procedures of the hard copy and giving a homogeneous portrayal of architecture, as though there were no differences between the two versions. The questions concern two aspects, therefore, the culture of the clientele (the architects) and the ability of the photographers to fight to defend their authorship and independence. The history of architecture has benefitted from photography without acknowledging the true cultural value of this visual art and has considered it as a useful tool to demonstrate a theory. Besides, architectural photography since the sixties has helped the work of some architects to become iconic.



f2_Kaufmann House, Shulman invented the architecture photography with this iconic image that will resist over the time.

Julius Shulman. Palm Springs, California, USA 1947.

This was the case of the professional relationship between Julius Shulman and Richard Neutra and the Kaufmann House built in Palm Springs in 1946. Photographed by Shulman in 1947, it became the most famous, iconic image, which depicted the house taken from the garden at night against the background of the mountains. Strictly black and white, Shulman's portrayal of the Kaufmann House highlighted the full-empty ratio thanks to the night scene with artificial lighting inside, which reflected the light and made the spatial envelope appear to float. The eye, however, is attracted solely by the spectacle of the night light. An example in which the photograph completely changes the architecture, relegating Neutra to the position of architect in the front row thanks to Shulman's photographs which turning it into something spectacular. Thus, from Frampton to Zevi, every book on the history of architecture uses that iconographic shot of the Kaufmann House that will resist over time. The question we have to ask ourselves is whether this way of representing space helps our understanding or whether it is a way to commercially promote the architecture. If we take a look at contemporary architects and photographers, we can see their intention is commercial promotion. They

have no interest in using the camera to help outline a mix of images to write the story of a work that will not be merely a series of photographs reproducing the technical drawings. Within a short time, Shulman became the official photographer of the Californian Mid-Century modern movement. He photographed every building, with the exception of the works of Craig Ellwood. The American photographer contributed not only to Neutra's commercial success and exploitation, but also to that of another protagonist of the golden era of Palm Springs, Albert Frey. Although William Fox Talbot invented photography at the same time as Daguerre, the genre of architectural photography did not develop systematically in Europe as it did with Shulman on the West Coast and Ezra Stoller on the East Coast. At the same time as the presence of photographers of architecture we witness another phenomenon: photographs taken by architects conceived as albums of visual notes. Le Corbusier did this when he used photography to document his Journey to the East in 1911, as the research by Giuliano Gresleri⁴ and Tim Benton⁵ has demonstrated. Erich Mendelsohn was another who, during his American travels, used photography to provide evidence not only of the archetypes of grain elevators in Buffalo, but also of New York urban spaces: Giuseppe Pagano and his research on the Italian rural landscape. More recently we can observe the photographs which the designer, Mario Bellini, took in 1972 during his travels in the USA, visiting many major works of architecture from Arcosanti to Chicago. Not forgetting Aldo Rossi's Polaroid photos and the bond the Milan architect established with Luigi Ghirri, author of the reportage on his architecture. Photography which interprets architecture is the topic of research conducted by the reportage photographer, René Burri, who told the story of Le Corbusier's everyday life and, as Arthur Rüegg points out: "he was interested in architecture as part of a story"⁶. In Italy, Gianni Berengo Gardin depicted the human aspect of Renzo Piano's works, from the visitors to the Centre Georges Pompidou to the workmen on the construction sites. Thus, both Gardin and Burri made use of photography to narrate a story from the initial phases to the final consumers, in contrast with cold, analytical documentary photography, which lacks an interesting story or spatial development. A very different approach is that of the globalised Dutch photographer, Iwan Baan, whose very over-rated photography is incapable of being as spectacular and monumental as that of Shulman. However, I am unable to ignore the expressive force in Shulman, despite his interest as a historian and photographer in photography based on sequences, and on the technique of montage and of film pace. This is why I believe photography alone is not sufficient to narrate architecture. Additional media are needed: a written text, a critical visual text (as written by the art historian, Rosalind Krauss) and the film taught to us by the avant-garde and by the Dada movement in particular⁷.



f3_Unité d'habitation. A reportage of the daily life is another way to interpret, with photography, architecture.

René Burri. Marseille, France 1947.

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interpreting architecture: between photography and film

In order to connect with space, the visual artist chooses to interpret architecture from a personal viewpoint to express an authorial linguistic research. This stance is quite the contrary to that of the person who coldly and analytically records by taking photographs which are well prepared and technically correct, but nothing more. To document and to narrate a story are two opposite attitudes. A pure documentation of a building needs an operator, not a photographer, who knows how to use an instrument. Narrating a story, however, needs an author, who can interpret what stands before him, whether it is a house, an industrial building or a museum. To photograph a space, a building known as “poor”, banal architecture implies a conceptual position of the photographer that generates visual recognition, something which often simply does not happen. Thus, if we compare the photographs of Guido Gudi and Richard Pare for the book *Mies in America*, two concepts of photography emerge⁸. Gudi pays attention to detail, to the consumption of architecture over time, to the slow revelation of space as the natural light changes during the day, exposing the 8x10” plates in the same way as the great American photographer, Walker Evans, his inspiration from the seventies onwards. He appears to be the author of a clear, technically correct photography, which nevertheless lacks that expressive pathos a photograph of an architectural work must have.



f4_IIT. Guido pays attention to the light. In particular the diagonal line of the building follows the line of the shadow so the image is divided in two parts.
The photographer uses an optical effect to represents the architecture.

Guido Gudi, Chicago, Illinois, USA 2000.

However, the winning, commercially captivating photography is that of Pare or Baan (shown by the number of commissions), certainly not that of Guidi who, apart from Mies, also has under his belt a research on the work of Le Corbusier and the ten-year recognition on Carlo Scarpa's Tomba Brion. The struggle, therefore, between documentation and interpretation is ideological. The majority of photographers of architecture have been trained as architects, whereas the photographers who depict architectural buildings and spaces in the cities work in the field of photography and their choice of frames and conceptual cross-references are interconnected, with more intense links with the visual arts, such as painting, cinema and literature. Photography provides a partial contribution to the portrayal of an architectural space. This is most effectively interpreted with the aid of moving images, of film which does not necessarily have to be a documentary, but rather with films which speak of architecture in the background. Nevertheless, it has to be said that no media can replace a live visit to a building. Compared to a photograph, a film enters inside the space and investigates the three-dimensional aspect by acting on the common elements within the architecture: light, composition, movement, rhythm. In the early twentieth century, film was used in a more experimental way, as shown by the films of the American artist, Man Ray, protagonist of the Dada avant-garde and Surrealism. His *Les Mystères du Château de Dé* [*The Mysteries of the Chateau of Dice*] (1929) was inspired by the work of Stéphane Mallarmé "Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard" ["A Throw of Dice Will Never Abolish the Hazard"]. It was originally meant to be a documentary on the villa Robert Mallet Stevens had constructed for the Viscounts of Noailles in Hyères in the south of France. Man Ray decided to write a script together with Jacques André Boiffard. The first frames show a series of sequences approaching Villa Noailles while, in Paris, two men are playing out their destiny with dice. They are anonymous characters (interpreted by Boiffard and Ray) wearing tights as face masks. The dice say yes, you have to go, so the two begin a car journey through wintry landscapes to the south of France. To where there is a "castle", the villa of the Viscounts of Noailles (1925). In the villa, other "faceless" actors, including the viscounts Charles and Marie-Laure themselves, are playing dice, swimming in the pool and doing gym exercises, inspired by the typical dynamism of the avant-garde. What emerges is Man Ray's ability to "use" the architecture as a set for the story to be told, which allows a new interpretation of Mallet-Stevens' architecture. Man Ray investigates the space with the cine-camera to give greater expressive force compared to a photograph. "In the film the architecture takes centre stage", writes Kim Knowles, "and dictates the trajectory of the camera, as well as formal compositions within the frame. The villa's expansive space, with its fluid passages between interior and exterior, brings to mind the transitory space of a film set, a transience to which Man Ray will frequently draw attention throughout the course of the film"⁹.

This is very different from *Architecture d'aujourd'hui* (1930), which Pierre Chenal filmed in Paris under the influence of Le Corbusier. Here the title of the short film makes us assume it is an x-ray of the architecture of the period, whereas it actually reveals the magnificence of the works of Le Corbusier with a few frames of the Parisian works of Mallet-Stevens. Before Man Ray in 1926, Fritz Lang's colossal *Metropolis* had depicted the urban scenario of skyscrapers, inspired by New York and the developing civilisation of the machine and technology. During the twentieth century, there were many films which used architecture as a set, or as the subject of the screenplay. In Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959), the house in the final scene was constructed with the architecture of F.L. Wright in mind. Wright had also been protagonist ten years earlier in 1949 in King Vidor's *The Fountainhead* (1949), taken from Ayn Rand's short story and inspired by the life of Frank Lloyd Wright, alias Howard Roark, played by Gary Cooper.

It was, however, to be Jean-Luc Godard, one of the creators, together with Truffaut, of the French New Wave, who was to tell the story of an architectural work, Casa Malaparte, in his *Contempt* (1963) and make it a fundamental part of the finale of the film. Taken from the homonymous novel by Alberto Moravia, it is the story of a love triangle between the writer,

his wife and the producer. The writer is Michel Piccoli, his wife is played by Brigitte Bardot with Jack Palance as the producer involved in producing a film by Fritz Lang on the myth of the Odyssey. Godard worked on two levels, the intimacy of the relationship of the couple and that of the discord between the artistic and commercial film. Space is the main protagonist of the film, initially the studios of Cinecittà and Silver Cine, followed by the apartment where Piccoli and Bardot argue in the middle of a crisis, and lastly the enchanted sea of Capri with Casa Malaparte. Rented by the producer Prokosch/Palance, it is the setting for a discussion on the language of Lang's film and the famous scene of Bardot fleeing across the roof to pose nude under the Mediterranean sun. Godard adopted an extended series of tracking shots which investigated the spaces in the house, (designed by Adalberto Libera in 1938, with the collaboration of the writer Curzio Malaparte), the views from Alberto Savinio's horizontal wooden framed windows and lastly the terrace. "The element of primary importance here is the staircase –writes John Hejduk–, which rises and ends on the flat terraced roof. It has a double function: a door, going up towards a vision of the sky and the sea, and downwards is a theatre –like flight of steps, in which the (imaginary) public sits with their backs in line with the sea and their eyes fixed on a facing point of escape"¹⁰. Godard's stark gaze is nothing as spectacular as that of the American studios or as sleek as Shulman's photographs. It shows us a house with peeling plaster, which has deteriorated under the effect of the sea salt, almost as evidence of the psychological wear and tear of the couple Piccoli-Bardot, induced by the architectural space and by the overwhelming beauty of the Mediterranean.

Recent years have seen a proliferation of the documentary film genre, where narration has been replaced by a series of interviews of the protagonists, architects, historians, critics, with the addition of a bit of historic footage. However, it lacks the urgency to experiment new visual languages, such as those of Ray, Lang and Godard. A rare exception is the documentary *My Architect: A son's journey* (2003) by Nathaniel Kahn, who travels the world seeking his father, the famous architect, Louis Kahn. This narrative documentary was nominated by the Academy Awards as Best Documentary in 2004. In *My Architect*, architecture is clearly the protagonist. The story of father and son reveals Kahn's work from a different, more intimate, personal point of view, from Philadelphia to Dacca, by meeting the people who knew him, where architecture is narrated so as to be universally understood.

endnotes

1. Mission Héliographique was founded in 1851. It was the first public commission to appoint the photographers Henri Le Secq, Gustave Le Gray, Auguste Mestral, Edouard Baldus, Hippolyte Bayard to document the state of French landmarks.

2. Mission photographique de la DATAR developed in 1984 from an idea of Bernard Latarjet and the photographer, François Hers and concluded in 1989. Twenty-nine French and foreign photographers were invited to document the transformations of the French landscape: from Dominique Auerbacher to Lewis Baltz, from Gabriele Basilico to Raymond Depardon, and including Robert Doisneau, Gilbert Fastenaekens, Pierre de Fenoyl, Jean-Louis Garnell, Frank Gohlke, François Hers, Joseph Koudelka, Richard Pare, Holger Trulzsch, Sophie Ristelhueber.

3. Italo Zannier, "Le Corbusier fotografo", in *Le Corbusier. Viaggio in Oriente*, ed. Giuliano Gresleri, (Venice: Marsilio Editore, 1984) 69.

4. The historian of architecture, Giuliano Gresleri, was the first to discover the existence of the photographs Le Corbusier took during his Voyage d'Orient (1911). They were part of the documents kept at Le Corbusier's mother's home in Vevey and discovered by his niece, Jacqueline Jeanneret. Gresleri's research allowed Tim Benton to further analyse and discover Le Corbusier the photographer thirty years later.

5. In 2013, Tim Benton conducted the research entitled "Le Corbusier Secret Photographer", published by Lars Muller Publishers, in which he meticulously analyses all the photographic equipment, from the images taken with various cameras to the still frames and films shot using a 16 mm movie camera.

6. Arthur Rüegg, "René Burri's Vision of Le Corbusier", in *Le Corbusier photographs by René Burri*, ed. Arthur Rüegg (Basel-Boston-Berlin: Birkhäuser, 1999) 14.
7. In her essay entitled "Emblèmes ou lexies: le texte photographique" in Hans Namuth. L'atelier de Jackson Pollock, ed. E.A. Carmean, Jean Clay, Rosalind Krauss, Francis V. O' Connor, Barbara Rose (Paris: Macula, 1978), the art historian, Rosalind Krauss, wrote "One of the major roles of a critic is to help us see, understand or read something that is there in the work and that we haven't seen, to define the characteristics of a created object, and we say look at this or let's listen to that [...] The criticism we are accustomed to is usually in the form of a written text: but we know that works of art often have a critical function [...] like all the other forms, photography can be used for this purpose [...]".
8. The CCA commissioned Richard Pare and Guido Guidi to prepare the iconographic layout of the "Mies in America" exhibition curated by Phyllis Lambert from 17 October 2001 to 20 January 2002.
9. Kim Knowles, "From Mallarmé to Mallet-Stevens: Reading architectural space in Man Ray's Les Mystères du Château de Dé", *French Studies* 4 (2011) 461.
10. John Hejduk, "Casa come me", *Domus* 605 (1980):8-13.

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